

## HUFFINGTON POST:

As I embarked on the [AFT's first-ever "back-to-school tour"](#) last week, I had a feeling of great optimism, as I always do at the beginning of the school year. But it was reinforced when I was joined by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan for our first stop -- the city of St. Louis.

Competition over the generous portion of the federal stimulus funds for public schools -- called "Race to the Top" funds -- is set to begin shortly. But what I saw in St. Louis demonstrated that the race has already begun, and that city's collaboration, support for teachers, community schools and innovative labor agreements could provide a model for the rest of us.

As Secretary Duncan said, "Let's face it. St. Louis has struggled." A difficult history of racial tension combined with declining enrollment and resources in the public schools led to rapid turnover in the superintendent's office and, ultimately, to a state takeover of the schools in 2007.

In the last year, with the appointment of a new superintendent who believes in working with teachers and their union, along with a union that has a five-point agenda for change, a renaissance has begun in the St. Louis Public Schools. Together, they have embraced new and innovative approaches to alternative education. The city has put a premium on supporting new teachers with a focused and strong mentoring program designed not only to keep talent in the system, but also to help new teachers develop their skills. In addition, St. Louis has embraced something Secretary Duncan and I both deeply believe in -- community schools. The city acknowledges that sometimes the conditions in our kids' lives hamper learning and success, and that if we can provide many of the services struggling families need through the schools, we can build better families and stronger communities, and enable our children to succeed.

And there is something else -- an extra ingredient -- that lies at the heart of St. Louis' recent success: collaboration. At the Innovative Concept Academy, its founder, Family Court Judge Jimmie Edwards, told me that it took an "assembly of odd couples" to get his groundbreaking school up and running -- requiring all stakeholders to come out of their respective corners and work together for the sake of these kids who, without their help, would have a very tough road ahead. The school was focused on the 200 students in the system who had the most deeply entrenched behavior problems -- kids who had been repeatedly suspended and were on the verge of expulsion. "It is more important to collaborate for children than it is to dig in for any other reason," said the judge. AFT St. Louis President Mary Armstrong was one of the key leaders who stepped up to ensure that the teachers in this unique school had the kind of flexibility they needed to reach their students.

St. Louis' approach isn't only succeeding because of funding. True reform requires more than simply funding. It requires valid, reliable, sustainable and fair policies; thoughtful implementation; and the collaborative efforts necessary for success. What we hope to see as states start to compete in the official Race to the Top is a spirit of real innovation, real collaboration and a real commitment to building programs that are branches on a growing, vibrant tree, not, as the proverb warns, branches without a tree. We need innovations that support good teaching by measuring the right things in the right way, and then using what we learn to further inform instruction -- in other words, a self-reinforcing cycle of success.

I saw the beginnings of growing that tree at the Innovative Concept Academy, at Clay Elementary and at Lexington Elementary in St. Louis. I look forward to even more examples of collaboration, innovation and success as I make my way across the country visiting our schools in the next two weeks.

Read more at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randi-weingarten/the-race-to-the-top-has-a\\_b\\_273211.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randi-weingarten/the-race-to-the-top-has-a_b_273211.html)